



AAC Publications

Fall on Rock, Failure to Follow Route, Lack of Communication

Colorado, Elk Mountains, Capitol Peak

On July 19 at 7 p.m., the Pitkin County Sheriff's Office received the report of an overdue climber on Capitol Peak (14,130 feet). Climbing partners stated that after reaching the summit via the northeast ridge (which requires crossing the exposed, Class 4 Knife Edge ridge), Ryan Palmer (35) attempted to climb down the north face rather than negotiate the northeast ridge a second time. He did this without discussion with his climbing partners. Palmer's partners continued to descend the route across the Knife Edge and could see Palmer as he worked his way down the north face. When he didn't arrive in camp, they decided to hike out and report him overdue.

On July 20, Mountain Rescue Aspen sent an airplane with spotters to look for Palmer. They were unable to locate any signs of him, but determined which areas were most probable for the missing climber to be. Mountain Rescue Aspen sent foot teams into the field. Two teams took separate trails up to Capitol Lake, and then one team climbed to the base of the north face while the other interviewed climbers in the area. At 2:10 p.m., the team located a body matching the description of Palmer at the base of the north face.

Analysis

Capitol Peak is known for its exposure and loose rock—it is one of the most difficult of Colorado's fourteeners to climb. Taking the standard descent route, the Knife Edge, would have been the most prudent choice, as the route has relatively solid rock and the climbing party would have been familiar with some of the objective dangers. Authorities speculate that Palmer assumed he could find an easier descent route. (Source: Deputy Adam Crider, Pitkin County Sheriff's Office.)

Images

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